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ABSTRACT

Graduate students enrolled in the play-based Curriculum Research Seminar at Pacific Oaks College (Pasadena) observed and wrote about how children began play and carried out various themes in early childhood settings, and how teachers encouraged or discouraged play themes. Findings indicated that some students related play to issues of bias, development, stress, and creativity. This paper examines the meaning of play as viewed by these students and the role of play within faculty members' interests in progressive education, human development, developmentally appropriate practice, arts in education, emergent curriculum, therapeutic settings, and bicultural, multiethnic contexts. A large portion of the paper examines how the seminar faculty and the college community studied and supported play by: (1) creating an art studio that gave children opportunities to play with different media; (2) examining the role of play within the emergent curriculum; (3) exploring the theory that play is a context for developing and revealing the child's sense of community; and (4) focusing on the play of bicultural children, teachers' response to that play, and cultural perspectives regarding the role of play in learning. (KDFB)

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The Meaning of Play: Perspectives from Pacific Oaks College

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"What do we mean by play?" a student asked in our first seminar meeting for HD 499, Play-Based Curriculum Research Seminar. "It seems so vague."

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HD 499 began in 1994 when four faculty members at Pacific Oaks College—Betty Jones, Karen Neubert, Mary Beth Lakin, and Renatta Cooper—decided to design a course to foster conversations among people committed to the healthy development of young children and to develop ways to support children's play as part of Pacific Oaks' work for the Four-College Consortium. Graduate students enrolled in the class were asked to observe and to bring back examples of play at designated centers, and to write about how children began play and carried out various

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themes and how teachers encouraged, or in some cases discouraged, play themes. One of the responsibilities of the students was to find ways to share their observations with the "observed," acting as "broadcasters" to parents, teachers, children, and administrators in the schools where they collected data.

The research seminar met once a month for three hours. Faculty members asked many of the questions. Looking back on the experience, Karen Neubert wrote recently, "Our discussions on play legitimized the idea of 'play' as being *something*, serious. The students began to 'look' on more levels and to feel freer to verbalize what they were seeing. . . . The playful, creative spirit of the instruction encouraged students to say things they might not otherwise say. We heard many stories about play."

The instructors for the research seminar wanted to get at the students' definitions of play; we tried to do this in a playful, challenging way. Each of us had her own individual interests. Renatta Cooper had been observing bicultural children and how they were often punished for their play styles: Had any of the students in the research seminar observed bias about particular play styles? What did teachers encourage or discourage? Betty Jones connected play with the issue of emergent curriculum: How did children play? How did teachers play? How was the play of adults and children built into the curriculum? Karen Neubert wanted to know everything about play and art: How could children and adults play together with art? How could art become a part of everyday curriculum, visually reflecting the children's stories, fantasies, fears, and playfulness? Mary Beth Lakin brought to the class her interest in observation: How could we more carefully and clearly observe children at play? What did the observations of play tell us about children?

It was hard for the students at times to stay focused on play; some of them meandered into other areas. Was play a serious enough subject to study for a semester? Was play really the most important issue to them? For most students, it became serious enough. Students related the concept of play to issues of bias, development, stress, and creativity. At each meeting, everyone brought her or his detailed observations and questions. One student made an intensive study of an individual child's play and learned more about development through that observation than from any other source of study.

Some concerns related to the teacher's role—what the teacher was or was not doing about play. It was hard to be an observer when a teacher reacted negatively or indifferently to a child's play. How could the student converse with such a teacher? Was it appropriate? If the student was to broadcast the classroom's play activities, what could she say or do about a teacher's stifling actions? In the research seminar students could safely discuss the actions of teachers and possible helpful responses. The discussions often helped students to put the teacher's actions into context.

The research seminar makes play the subject of serious attention and discussion. At the same time, its creative mandate encourages students to see how play makes life joyful and interesting. The following sections describe how the seminar faculty and the college community go about their work of discovering, enjoying, and supporting play.

Play in the Art Studio

In 1977 artist-in-residence Karen Neubert, created an art studio that gave children a chance to play—to explore, feel, and imagine—with many different kinds of media. Karen's view of play, art, and their connectedness has influenced her approach to the art studio and to her work with children, teachers, and practicum students:

> In the making of art, play is a crucial element. It is the axis or central spark plug or the glue. In the unfolding of an idea, be it in word or in clay or paint, something in the soul is pleased and exhilarated. Through it, we are drawn forward into unfamiliar terrain and exciting sights. In the tedium of work that is required to focus and enlarge this kernel of excitement, we remember the play, the fun of hovering on the brink of the new. We can also enjoy practicing and replaying our ideas, each time refining and honing the form closer and closer to original perception.
>
> Play can be up or down, loose or tight, complicated or simple, with other players or without—but on some level it usually is fun. The kernel of joy is what keeps us going on to the next step.

> So in this sense, play is a sublime and radiant facet of the mind. Children's play may be simple repetition of sounds, or squishing the colors together on paper . . . or it may be tying a shoelace, forming a word, or discovering a 'face' in the scribbles. It is part of that tiny opening in the mind called creativity and higher thinking. It is connected understanding—the playful thoughts jumping from dendrite to dendrite like frogs in our minds.

The art studio expanded into a practicum experience for college students planning to teach young children in a formal educational setting. Students took Karen's course, Children, Painting and Clay, and practiced theory in the art studio with her guidance. Over the years, a pull-out enrichment program developed at the Children's School (given the time constraints on teachers and the effect of separate art space). Karen and Betty Jones established a depth curriculum study group in which teachers and practicum students could talk about curriculum in their classrooms, where curriculum came from, and the impact of children's play on curriculum planning. The repeated questions were these: What's happening in your curriculum? Where did it come from? What are you going to do with it? What are the children really interested in? What will they do with this good idea I have? How can I re-represent the experience? Karen's role was to help teachers and students link nonverbal forms and expressions to verbal ones. How could teachers and practicum students model visual expression appropriately?

When we began the research seminar, participating graduate students were required to attend the curriculum depth study group and to observe and listen to the teachers' ideas. There students could put teachers' actions into context by listening to the reasons why teachers responded to children's play in certain ways.

Play at the Heart of Emergent Curriculum

In 1989, three Pacific Oaks faculty members—Betty Jones, John Nimmo, and Mary Beth Lakin—team-taught a course on emergent curriculum. Planning and implementing the course provided a model for what we wanted early childhood teachers to do with the play of children in their classrooms: observe and use play

themes in curriculum development. At the time, Betty was much more comfortable and skillful than John or I in the role of watching the adult students in the class, finding out what interested them, what they played at, and building these observations into the college course curriculum. Many times John or I wanted to hurry up and decide what we were going to do to add more "structure" to the college course. It was difficult to step back and let the curriculum emerge, to watch the adult students play with their questions and interests, and to use that play in the structure of our course curriculum.

Such curriculum development was consistent with what Betty Jones, Pacific Oaks College's resident scribe, sees as Pacific Oaks's "relatively consistent philosophy throughout its nearly fifty-year history." Pacific Oaks began as a school for children with a strong nursery education/child study philosophy. Another important part of Pacific Oaks's roots was progressive education as articulated by John Dewey. The faculty's development of a philosophy of emergent curriculum grew from the theoretical foundation of progressive education and child study.

At the college, we explore the variety of places from which curriculum emerges. Students and teachers are encouraged to observe children at play and to build curriculum from their observations. In the November 1993 *Curriculum Depth Study Group* newsletter, Betty Jones notes that teachers are often a source of emergent curriculum and the role of play in developing curriculum:

> When adults bring their passions and their playfulness to school, wonderful curriculum emerges. We've seen that some of the events, places, and things that generate adult energy are gardening, cooking and eating, music and dance, stories and drama, rituals and celebrations, clay and paint, being outdoors, communicating with others, and taking action for social justice.

Play in the Community

Our curriculum, both at the Children's School and the college, concentrates on how people develop and live together throughout their lives. By observing children and adults at work and play and listening to them as they reflect on their lives and learning, we con-

tinue to develop our curriculum to meet the needs of children and families. For instance, areas of concentration, such as anti-bias curriculum and development of bicultural children, emerge from our community experience as well as from our knowledge of current trends and social forces. John Nimmo, a member of the Pacific Oaks faculty, has been exploring the theory that "play is a significant context for both developing and revealing a child's sense of community." In a course that John teaches about community, students explore a variety of questions: What is the role of play in acquiring a sense of community belonging? In what ways does a child's play reflect his/her understanding of community? How do children play in their own neighborhood/cultural communities? How does this relate to play in school contexts?

In John's course, the concept of play is analyzed on several levels. Students think about play in their communities; they think about the differences and similarities. They play in the classroom setting—for example, they paint a group mural in order to examine how communities develop.

The faculty members at Pacific Oaks want to understand the developmental tasks of each stage of growth and how to provide an environment conducive to the healthy development of each human being. In planning curriculum, we try to provide a safe and challenging place to play and learn for each child and adult. In classes on theories of human development, we encourage students not only to grasp theory but to play with it. In playing with theory, we see how theorists came about their ideas, how their theories may or may not fit our lives, and how gaps in theory might be filled. This playing with theory also develops into the emergent curriculum of the college classroom, where the ideas and interests of students merge to form a focus, another question to pursue. An observer can see play threading throughout the college curriculum: the research seminar, child painting and clay, emergent curriculum, and community as context.

The Multiethnic Contexts of Play

In the Children's School and the college, our community has worked diligently to provide an environment that encourages play as a part of the learning experience. We also realize that we have a responsibility as educators outside our immediate environment. In

speaking about the definition of play, we must go beyond traditional theoretical and developmental definitions to analyze cultural, political, and economic influences.

Renatta Cooper has examined the paradigm of developmentally appropriate practice, so identified with early childhood education, in the context of multiethnic realities. In the courses she teaches and in faculty discussions about curriculum, Renatta challenges participants to broaden the definitions of play. As early childhood educators, we have tended to examine play from the perspective of "developmentally appropriate practice"; although this philosophy makes some note of cultural differences, it reflects a primarily middle-class, Euro-American point of view. In an informal paper, Renatta reflects on the issues she has observed and analyzed in class discussions and faculty curriculum meetings:

> As I consider the issue of play from a bicultural, multiethnic context, I have been very focused on how parents of different cultures view play. I have felt and expressed that this is a very different perspective from that held by us as members of the ECE Consortium. How professionals, early childhood educators from other cultural groups, view play has been in my thoughts, but not in a prominent place. This all crystalized for me at the recent National Black Child Development Institute National Conference. The issue of play became the center of a roundtable discussion that focused on NAEYC's DAP "Bible" and its relevance to work with black children.
>
> Ours is a culture that does not view play as something that should take place in school. Play is amusing, and an appropriate part of childhood, but it isn't viewed as a critical part of the learning process. Do black children learn through play differently from children of the dominant culture? Probably, given a cultural context in which different things are valued. It seems logical to assume that the play that takes place in that culture would reflect those values. Funny, as a young child I can remember how often I played "school," with my friends, with my dolls, with my younger brother. I was the teacher, I had my students sit at desks and read, or I read to them. It was definitely not a "playful" model. As I look back on it, I received a lot of positive attention for this play, especially in

my efforts to make younger children behave and sit still as part of the "school game."

In all honesty, it doesn't sound much like fun as I reflect on this game. It did, however, accurately reflect the societal and cultural attitudes about play and school. [The game] also ensured that I knew what the expected behavior was within a school context, even though I had never been to preschool. I knew that school was serious; even "play school" was serious.

The serious way in which African Americans view play and school is rooted in our social and historical context in the U.S. It is a context which says to us:

1. You must do ten times better than white people to get the same opportunities they have, and even then you may not.

2. Education is the path away from dangerous, demeaning, and dirty jobs.

3. Parents who are middle class or who have middle-class aspirations for their children must see to it that each generation becomes better educated than the one preceding it.

4. Given the economic and social reality of our people, our children don't have time to play at school.

From my perspective, as a bicultural proponent of developmental education, points 1, 2, and 3 are absolutely true. They do not, however, lead logically to point 4. Yet I don't believe that either side—the "Progressive Developmentalist" and play proponents, and the traditional black "Back to Basic" educators—have proven their point when it comes to educating black children. It will probably take a blend of both philosophies to achieve the best possible educational outcome for black children. The two camps do not have the same type or amount of credibility within the black community.

These are issues that extend beyond the African-American community. Latinos and most Asian immigrant groups tend to select traditional education models over developmental

ones whenever they have the choice. An exception can be found among some Asian Americans, who may choose a developmental preschool experience before placing their children in a traditional school system. If we really want to discuss play and to have a more play-based curriculum for all children, we need to remain aware that there is a major selling job to do not just to parents but also to educators who do not share this perspective. Is this part of our vision?

I believe that play is an invaluable part of the learning experience. It is where the concrete and abstract are merged for and by the child. It is through engrossing play that we truly learn to think for ourselves, something that can only be learned through an experiential process. Yet how do you measure something that probably should not be measured? How do we convince a skeptical audience of play's importance without a measure?

Continuing discussions at Pacific Oaks College in faculty meetings on curriculum, in depth curriculum meetings with teachers and practicum students, and in college classes force us to *1) re-examine our definitions of play, 2) consider the language and concepts we use in our discussions about play,* and *3) identify and expand the groups with whom we communicate about play.*

In analyzing our definitions of play, the faculty must consider a range of behaviors that we have historically ignored or negated: What are our biases about the many activities that could be called play? How are our play ideas influenced by the communities in which we grow up, live, and work? The language and concepts we use in our discussions about play have been inspired by the roots of progressive education, peace education, and nursery school education, then further nurtured by the philosophies of anti-bias curriculum and emergent curriculum. Karen's continuing examination of art's place in the curriculum has helped us to connect visual expression with play. John's questions about community have pushed faculty and students to think about the language they use in describing play in their communities and the concepts they have about play. Renatta's analysis of play in a multiethnic context challenges us to consider the major selling job we have to do: What do we want to convey about play? To whom do we want to communicate

our theories about play? As a faculty, we know the place of play in the early childhood setting in both theory and practice. What is the place of play in elementary, middle school, and high school settings, in therapeutic clinical settings for a child, adult, or family? What theories do we teach in the college classroom? What corresponding practical opportunities do we provide the student getting her credential in special education or her master's degree in marriage, family, and child counseling? Betty steadily reminds the research seminar course that we are broadcasters doing the important work of communicating about play. How do we identify and expand our audiences for our message? As observers, listeners, scribes, and broadcasters, what can we learn from others—teachers, parents, children, and administrators—about play? How do we communicate our ideas to each other?

In the Children's School and the college, we have worked diligently to provide an environment in which play as a part of the learning experience is appreciated and encouraged. We do not always succeed, but we continue to be committed to play in its many forms and facets across cultures. We realize that we have a responsibility as educators toward the world outside our immediate environment. In speaking about the definition of play, we must go beyond traditional theoretical and developmental definitions to analyze cultural, political, and economic influences. As a community, we remain concerned with how to better support play in culturally sensitive and practical ways. In closing, let our seminar students have the final words on the value and place of play in their own and children's lives. Join me in imagining what the next comments in this interchange could be:

> Everything a kid does—math, science, art—*if* it's exciting and interesting. If it's organized, it's separate from play.
>
> Everything the child generates; *if* it's imposed, it doesn't always generate play. When does something stop being play?
>
> It must be spontaneous. We have to consider what the child initiates.

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If you interview a child, you will find that sometimes play is hard. "Time to go play," a child might sigh.

Everything that comes from my nephew, he calls play.

Do you play?

My favorite things are things I play at . . .

When I forget about others' expectations, about past or future, when I'm puttering, doing something hands-on, feeling free, that's when I am playing.

This still seems so vague to me.

Well, it's making sense of the world, like dramatic play or art.

It's imagination. You're using your imagination when you're playing.

The joy of play is that it is for its own sake. You can push back the boundaries.

For adults, it's a relaxed waste of time.

I'm confused now about the meaning of play. I watch children in my country [Japan] play, and I think I know what it means. Now I am watching play in the U.S., and I am not so sure. I want to compare.

Play is something we think we know what it means. But we all mean different things.

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